

UNNECESSARY DISTANCE: Football players lost in shuffle

Tim Smith 8:01 a.m. EDT October 22, 2015



(Photo: CANTON ATHLETICS)

The long road — 443 miles to be exact — awaits the Canton varsity football team, finishing the 2015 regular season with Saturday's game in Galesburg, Ill. of all places.

Looking to 2016 and beyond, however, the three football programs at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park need to get together with administrators and take the *high* road.

That means getting those teams together on the football field, at least in semi-regular fashion.

For background purposes, the Park features two perennial powerhouses (Canton, Plymouth) and a third team (Salem) that is working hard to get to that level of excellence.

At the heart of the matter is a desire by Salem officials to level the competitive playing field and bolster a program trying to finally end a long playoff drought.

Nobody blames them for wanting to build something great, but there is no reason why the two oldest rivals at P-CEP (Canton, Salem) can't crack helmets in the name of tradition.

To make the tournament, six victories are required. But Salem folks lamented being forced to automatically face the Chiefs and Wildcats every year.

Missed opportunity

But now, the Rocks aren't playing their neighbors and the Chiefs have to travel virtually to Iowa, a trip that will cost several thousand dollars during a time when public school districts are bleeding money.

Plymouth opened the 2015 schedule in Macomb County, against Utica Eisenhower. That's not a short trip, either.

"The fact that Plymouth and Canton (are) having to travel for their games has nothing to do with Salem not playing them," wrote Salem athletic director Brian Samulski in an e-mail to the Observer, "but with the fact that they struggle to find teams that want to play them because of their historical success on the field."

By the way, Salem didn't win enough this year to join the playoff party — even with a schedule not including Canton and Plymouth.

Lost in the shuffle are the players and other student-athletes at the Park. Ask any Salem player if he wants to go up against the Chiefs, against kids he goes to class with. Bragging rights are pretty big for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Of course he would want the chance. But in recent years, the opportunity hasn't been there.

Earlier this year, Salem officials decided to not honor an apparent verbal agreement for the Rocks and Canton Chiefs to square off in the opening game of the 2015 and 2016 seasons.

"In the eyes of administration at Salem this was an equity issue that was resolved by allowing Salem to always schedule an open opponent just as the other schools do for week 1," Samulski continued. "This will continue next year, as we open with Belleville week 1 and will be in a week 9 rotation with the KLAA."

The latter is new for 2016, as a second KLAA crossover contest is being added to the scheduling mix.

And two years earlier, the longstanding Sandman/Cummings game between the Chiefs and Rocks — a tradition for Week 9 — was scrapped at Salem's request.

The last time the Chiefs and Rocks got together in the game honoring two former Park athletic directors was 2012. Although the Rocks lost 28-27, they were a field goal shy of knocking out their rivals and in turn keeping Canton from the six-victory plateau.

Never again

Then, and now, Canton-Salem matchups are a win-win for kids, families and the schools. So are meetings between the Rocks and Wildcats.

Since the Sandman/Cummings series was yanked in 2013 by a former district administrator, the Chiefs were forced to scramble more than Matthew Stafford for Week 9 opponents.

One year it was Ann Arbor Pioneer, another it was Detroit Western.

This year was a nightmare for Canton athletic director Vernon Crump and head football coach Tim Baechler, trying to come up with a dance partner.

By February, there was nobody left anywhere near Canton Center and Joy roads.

Finally, during the spring, with the possibility of an eight-game season looming, Canton hooked up with Galesburg.

That's a long way to travel.

It's something that shouldn't have to happen again.